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THE MODERN NOVEL AND THE MODERN PLAY.

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As we glance down the long history of literature, we cannot but remark that certain literary forms, the novel at one time and the drama at another, have achieved a sweeping popularity, seemingly out of all proportion to their actual merit at the moment when they were flourishing most luxuriantly. In these periods of undue expansion, the prevalent form absorbed many talents not naturally attracted toward it. In the beginning of the sixteenth century in England, for instance, the drama was more profitable, and therefore more alluring, than any other field of literary endeavor; and so it was that many a young fellow of poetic temperament adventured himself in the rude theatre of those spacious days, even though his native gift was only doubtfully dramatic. No reader of Peele's plays and of Greene's can fail to feel that these two gentle poets were, neither of them, born playwrights called to the stage by irresistible vocation. Two hundred years later, after Steele and Addison had set the pattern of the eighteenth-century essay, the drama was neglected, and every man of letters was likely to be found striving for the unattainable ease and charm of "The Tatler" and "The Spectator." Even the elephantine Johnson, congenitally incapable of airy nothings and prone always to "make little fishes talk like whales," disported ponderously in "The Idler" and "The Rambler." The vogue of the essay was fleeting also; and a century later it was followed by the vogue of the novel,—a vogue which has already endured longer than that of the essay, and which has not yet shown any signs of abating. Yet the history of literature reminds us that the literary form most in favor in one century is very likely

to drop out of fashion in the next; and we are justified in asking ourselves whether the novel is to be supreme in the twentieth century as it was in the nineteenth, or whether its popularity must surely wane like that of the essay.

Although the art of fiction must be almost as old as mankind itself, the prose novel, as we know it now, is a thing of yesterday only. It is not yet a hundred years since it established itself and claimed equality with the other forms of literature. Novelists there had been, no doubt, and of the highest rank; but it was not until after "*Waverley*" and its successors swept across Europe triumphant and overwhelming that a fiction in prose was admitted to full citizenship in the republic of letters. Nowadays, we are so accustomed to the novel and so familiar with its luxuriance in every modern language that we often forget its comparative youth. Yet we know that no one of the muses of old was assigned to the fostering of prose-fiction, a form of literary endeavor which the Greeks did not foresee. If we accept Fielding's contention that the history of "*Tom Jones*" must be considered as a prose-epic, we are justified in the belief that the muse of the epic is not now without fit occupation.

Indeed, the modern novel is not only the heir of the epic, it has also despoiled the drama, the lyric and the oration of part of their inheritance. "*The Scarlet Letter*," for example, has not a little of the lofty largeness and of the stately movement of true tragedy; "*Paul and Virginia*," again, abounds in a passionate self-revelation which is essentially lyric; and many a novel-with-a-purpose, needless to name here, displays its author's readiness to avail himself of all the devices of the orator. In fact, the novel is now so various and so many-sided that its hospitality is limitless. It welcomes alike the exotic eroticism of M. Pierre Loti and the cryptic cleverness of Mr. Henry James, the accumulated adventure of Dumas and the inexorable veracity of Tolstoy. It has tempted many a man who had no native endowment for it; Motley and Parkman and Froude risked themselves in imaginative fiction, as well as in the sterner history which was their real birthright. And so did Brougham, far more unfitted for prose-fiction than Johnson was for the graceful eighteenth-century essay or Peele and Greene for the acted drama. Perhaps it is a consequence of this variety of method, which lets it proffer itself to every passer-by, that we recognize in the Victorian novel

the plasticity of form and the laxity of structure which we have discovered to be characteristic of the Elizabethan drama.

In her encroaching on the domain of the other muses, the prose-epic has annexed far more from her comic and tragic sisters than from any of the other six. An opportunity for a most interesting inquiry awaits the alert scholar who shall undertake to tell the rivalry of the novel and the play, tracing their influence on each other and making a catalogue of their mutual borrowings. Although the record has no special significance, it may be noted that they have never hesitated to filch plots from each other, the playwrights appropriating the inventions of the novelists and the novelists levying on the works of the playwrights,—Shakespeare, the dramatist, finding the action of his “*As You Like It*” ready to his hand in a tale of Lodge’s, and Le Sage, the story-teller, in his “*Gil Blas*” availing himself of scenes from Spanish comedies.

Far deeper, however, than any purloining of material are other interrelations of the novel and the play, which have been continually influencing one another, even when there was no hint of any plagiarism of subject-matter. The older of the two, the drama, long served as the model of prose-fiction; and not a few of the earlier practitioners of the later art began their literary careers as writers for the theatre, Le Sage for one, and, for another, Fielding. It is not to be wondered at that they were inclined to approach the novel a little as though it was a play, and to set their characters in motion with only a bare and summary indication of the appropriate environment. They were inclined to follow the swift methods proper enough on the stage, if not absolutely necessary there, instead of developing for themselves the more leisurely movement appropriate to prose-fiction. Both Fielding and Le Sage, it may be well to note, had profited greatly by their careful study of Molière and of his logical method of presenting character. In the “*Princess of Cleves*,”—perhaps the first effort at feminine psychology in fiction,—we discover the obvious impress of both Corneille and Racine on Madame de Lafayette,—the stiffening of the will to resolute self-sacrifice of the elder dramatic poet and the subtler analysis of motive dextrously attempted by the younger and more tender tragedian.

Just as Beaumarchais in the eighteenth century found his profit in a study of Le Sage’s attitude toward life, so Augier in the nineteenth century, and still more, Dumas *fils*, responded to the

sharp stimulus of Balzac. The richer and far more complicated presentation of character which delights and amazes us in the "Human Comedy" was most suggestive to the younger generation of French dramatists; and no one can fail to see the reflection of Balzac in the "*Maître Guérin*" of Augier and in the "*Ami des Femmes*" of Dumas. And, in their turn, these plays and their fellows supplied a pattern to the novelist—to Daudet especially. A certain lack of largeness, a certain artificiality of action in Daudet's "*Fromont jeune et Risler aîné*," is probably to be ascribed to the fact that the story was first conceived in the form of a play, although it was actually written as a novel.

The British novelist with whom this French novelist is often compared, and with whom he had much in common, was also impressed profoundly by the theatre of his own time and of his own country. But Dickens was less fortunate than Daudet, in that the contemporary English stage did not afford a model as worthy of imitation as the contemporary French stage. Of course, the native genius of Dickens is indisputable, but his artistic ideals are painfully unsatisfactory. His letters show him forever straining after effects for their own sake only, and striving to put just so much humor and just so much pathos into each one of the successive monthly parts into which his stories were chopped up. Very fond of the theatre from his early youth, Dickens had come near going on the stage as an actor; and, in his search for effects, he borrowed inexpensive mysteries from contemporary melodrama, and he took from it the implacable and inexplicable villain ever involved in dark plottings. It is significant that "No Thoroughfare," the one play of his invention which was actually produced, was performed at the Adelphi, and was discovered then not to differ widely from the other robust and high-colored melodramas ordinarily acted at that hopelessly unliterary playhouse. Daudet, although he was not gifted with the splendid creative force of Dickens, inherited the Latin tradition of restraint and harmony and proportion; and he had before his eyes on the French stage the adroitly contrived comedies of Augier and of Dumas *fils*, models far more profitable to a novelist than the violent crudities of the Adelphi.

Perhaps there is more than a hint of ingratitude in Daudet's later disgust with the inherent limitations of the drama,—a disgust more forcibly phrased by his friends, Zola and Goncourt and

Flaubert, realists all of them, eager to capture the theatre also and to rule it in their own way. In their hands, the novel was an invading conqueror; and they had the arrogance that comes from an unforeseen success. They were all eager to take possession of the playhouse, and to repeat in that new field of art the profitable victories they had gained in the library. But they declined to admit that the drama was a special art, with a method of its own. They resented bitterly the failures that followed when they refused to accept the conditions of the actual theatre; and they protested shrilly against these conditions when they vainly essayed to fulfil them. "What a horrible manner of writing is that which suits the stage!" Flaubert complained to George Sand. "The ellipses, the suspensions, the interrogations must be lavished, if one wishes to have liveliness; and all these things, in themselves, are very ugly." In other words, Flaubert was concerned with the rhetoric of the written word, and he had no relish for the rhythm of spoken dialogue.

These French novelists refused to perceive that the drama is, of necessity, the most democratic of the arts, since it depends, and has always depended, and must ever depend, absolutely upon the public as a whole. The strength of the drama, its immense advantage over other forms of literature, lies in this, that it must appeal to the mass of men, not to the intelligent more than to the unintelligent, not to the educated more than to the uneducated, not to any sect or clique or coterie, but to men as men. The laws of the drama may be deduced, all of them, from this principle, that in the theatre the playmaker has to interest a gathering of his own contemporaries, all sorts and conditions of men. If he cannot hold their attention, move them, sway them, control them, then he has failed frankly to do what he set out to do. And he can do this, he can make them laugh, and make them weep, make them feel and make them think, only by accepting the conditions of the theatre itself. Daudet and Zola had more of the needful understanding of their fellow creatures than Flaubert and Goncourt, more of the necessary sympathy; but they had all of them not a little of the conceit of the self-made man and they assumed the egotistic attitude of the cultivated aristocrat. It would have been well if they could have taken to heart what George Sand once wrote to Flaubert: "It seems to me that your school does not consider enough the sub-

stance of things, and that it lingers too much on the surface. By dint of seeking for form, it lets go of the fact. It addresses itself to men of cultivation. But there are, strictly speaking, no men of cultivation, for we are, first of all, men."

Because the drama was popular, these artistic aristocrats despised it. Although they pined to succeed as playmakers, they scorned the trouble of mastering the methods of the theatre. Because the drama, at its highest, attained to the loftier levels of literature, they assumed that a man of letters had no need to spy out the secrets of the stage. If they could not apply in the play the methods they had been applying skilfully and successfully in the novel, so much the worse for the play. Evidently, the drama was not literature, and the theatre was no place for a literary man. The fault was not in them; it could not be, since they had regenerated the novel. It must be in the stage itself, and in the stupidity of the public.

In one of his most vigorous essays, M. Brunetière joined issue with this little group of French novelists, and told them sharply that they had better consider anew the theatrical practices and prejudices which seemed to them absurdly outworn, and which they disdained as born of mere chance and surviving only by tradition. He bid them ask themselves if these tricks of the trade, so to style them, were not due to the fact that the dramatist's art is a special art, having its own laws, its own conditions, its own conventions, inherent in the nature of the art itself. When they expressed their conviction that the method of the novel ought to be applicable to the play, M. Brunetière reported that, if the novel was the play and if the play was the novel, then in all accuracy there would be neither novel nor play, but only a single and undivided form; and he insisted that, if as a matter of fact this single form did not actually exist, if it had divided itself, if there was such a thing as a novel and such a thing as a play, then that could be only because we go to the theatre to get a specific pleasure which we cannot get in the library. The practical critic gave them the sound advice that, if they sought to succeed in the theatre as they had succeeded in the library, they should study the art of the playwright, endeavoring to perceive wherein it differs from the art of the story-teller.

The points of agreement between the novel and the play are so obvious that there is some excuse for overlooking the fact that

the points of disagreement are almost as numerous. It is true that, in the play as in the novel, a story is developed by means of characters whose conversation is reproduced. So the game of golf is like the game of lawn-tennis, in so far that there are in both balls to be placed by the aid of certain implements. But as the balls are different and as the implements are different, the two games are really not at all alike; and it is when they are played most skilfully and most strictly according to the rules that they are most unlike.

The play is least dramatic when it most closely resembles the novel, as it did in the days of Peele and Greene, whose dramas are little more than narratives presented in dialogue. In the three centuries since Peele and Greene, the play and the novel have been getting further and further away from each other. Each has been steadily specializing, seeking its true self, casting out the extraneous elements proved to be useless. The novel in its highest development is now a single narrative, no longer distended and delayed by intercalated tales, such as we find in "*Don Quixote*" and "*Tom Jones*," in "*Wilhelm Meister*" and in "*Pickwick*," inserted for no artistic reason, but merely because the author happened to have them on hand. The play in its highest development is now a single action, swiftly presented, and kept free from lyrical and oratorical digressions existing for their own sake and not aiding in the main purpose of the drama.

The practitioners of each art conceive their subjects in accordance with the necessities of that art, the novelist thinking in terms of the printed page and the dramatist thinking in terms of the actual theatre, with its actors and with its spectators. Here, indeed, is a chief reason why the perspective of the play is different from the perspective of the novel, in that the playwright must perforce take account of his audience, of its likes and its dislikes, of its traditions and its desires. The novelist need not give a thought to his readers, assured that those in sympathy with his attitude and his mood will find him out sooner or later. To the story-teller, readers may come singly and at intervals; but the playmaker must attract his audience in a mass. Much of the merely literary merit of a drama may be enjoyed by a lone reader under the library lamp; but its essential dramatic quality is completely and satisfactorily revealed only in front of the footlights when the theatre is filled with spectators.

It is this consciousness that his appeal is not to any individual man, but to man in the mass, that makes the dramatist what he is. To scattered readers, each sitting alone, an author may whisper many things which he would not dare blurt out before a crowd. The playwright knows that he can never whisper slyly; he must always speak out boldly so that all may hear him; and he must phrase what he has to say so as to please the boys in the gallery without insulting the women in the stage boxes. To the silent pressure of these unrelated spectators he responds by seeking the broadest basis for his play, by appealing to elemental human sympathy, by attempting themes with more or less of universality. It is because the drama is the most democratic of the arts that the dramatist cannot narrow himself as the novelist may, if he chooses; and it is because this breadth of appeal is inherent in the acted play that Aristotle held the drama to be a nobler form than the epic. "The dramatic poem," said Mr. Henry James some thirty years ago when he was dealing with Tennyson's "Queen Mary," "seems to me of all literary forms the very noblest. . . . More than any other work of literary art, it needs a masterly structure."

Whether nobler or not, the dramatic form has always had a powerful fascination for the novelists, who are forever casting longing eyes on the stage. Mr. James himself has tried it, and Mr. Howells and Mark Twain also. Balzac believed that he was destined to make his fortune in the theatre; and one of Thackeray's stories was made over out of a comedy, acted only by amateurs. Charles Reade called himself a dramatist forced to be a novelist by bad laws. Flaubert and the Goncourts, Zola and Daudet wrote original plays, without ever achieving the success which befell their efforts in prose-fiction. And now, in the opening years of the twentieth century, we see Mr. Barrie in London and M. Hervieu in Paris abandoning the novel in which they have triumphed for the far more precarious drama. Nor is it without significance that the professional playwrights seem to feel little or no temptation to turn story-tellers. Apparently the dramatic form is the more attractive and the more satisfactory, in spite of its greater difficulty and its greater danger.

Perhaps, indeed, we may discover in this difficulty and danger one reason why the drama is more interesting than prose-fiction. A true artist cannot but tire of a form that is too facile; and he

is ever yearning for a grapple with stubborn resistance. He delights in technic for its own sake, girding himself joyfully to vanquish its necessities. He is aware that an art which does not demand a severe apprenticeship for the slow mastery of its secrets will fail to call forth his full strength. He knows that it is bad for the art and unwholesome for the artist himself, when the conditions are so relaxed that he can take it carelessly.

It was a saying of the old bard of Brittany that "he who will not answer to the rudder must answer to the rocks"; and not a few writers of prose-fiction have made shipwreck because they gave no heed to this warning. Many a novelist is a sloven in the telling of his tale, beginning it anywhere and ending it somehow, distracting attention on characters of slight importance, huddling his incidents, confusing his narrative, simply because he has never troubled himself with the principles of construction and proportion with which every playwright must needs make himself familiar. Just as the architectural students at the Beaux-Arts in Paris are required to develop at the same time the elevation and the ground-plan and the cross-section of the edifice they are designing, so the playwright, while he is working out his plot, must be continually solving problems of exposition and of construction, of contrast and of climax. These are questions with which the ordinary novelist feels no need to concern himself, for the reading public makes no demand on him and there is nothing urging him to attain a high standard. It is curious to remark that the newspaper reviewers of current fiction very rarely comment on the construction of the novels they are considering.

In other words, the novel is too easy to be wholly satisfactory to an artist in literature. It is a loose form of hybrid ancestry; it may be of any length; and it may be told in any manner,—in letters, as an autobiography or as a narrative. It may gain praise by the possession of the mere externals of literature, by sheer style. It may seek to please by description of scenery, or by dissection of motive. It may be empty of action and filled with philosophy. It may be humorously perverse in its license of digression,—as it was in Sterne's hands, for example. It may be all things to all men: it is a very chameleon-weathercock. And it is too varied, too negligent, too lax to spur its writer to his utmost effort, to that stern struggle with technic which is a true artist's never-failing tonic.

On the other hand, the drama is a rigid form, limited to the three hours' traffic of the stage. Just as the decorative artist has to fill the space assigned to him and must respect the disposition of the architect, so the playwright must work his will within the requirements of the theatre, turning to advantage the restrictions which he should not evade. He must always appeal to the eye as well as to the ear, never forgetting that the drama, while it is in one aspect a department of literature, in another is a branch of the show-business. He must devise stage-settings at once novel, ingenious and plausible; and he must invent reasons for bringing together naturally the personages of his play in the single place where each of his acts passes. He must set his characters firm on their feet, each speaking for himself and revealing himself as he speaks; for they need to have internal vitality as they cannot be painted from the outside. He must see his creatures as well as hear them; and he must know always what they are doing and how they are looking when they are speaking. He cannot comment on them or explain them, or palliate their misdeeds. He must project them outside of himself; and he cannot be his own lecturer to discuss out their motives. He must get on without any attempt to point out the morality of his work, which remains implicit although it must be obvious. He must work easily within many bonds, seeming always to be free and unhampered; and he must turn to account these restrictions and find his profit in them, for they are the very qualities which differentiate the drama and make it what it is.

This essential difference of the drama from the novel is so keenly appreciated by every novelist who happens also to be a dramatist, that he is rarely tempted to treat the same theme in both forms, feeling instinctively that it belongs either to the stage or to the library. Often, of course, he writes a novel rather than a play, because he knows that a certain theme, adequate as it may be for a novel, lacks that essential struggle, that naked assertion of the human will, that clash of contending desires, which must be visible in a play if it is to sustain the interest of an audience. Many a tale, pleasing to thousands of readers because it abounds in brisk adventure, will not lend itself to successful dramatization because its many episodes are not related to a single straightforward conflict of forces.

When Mr. Gillette undertook to make a play out of the Sher-

lock Holmes stories, which were not really dramatic, however ingeniously packed with thrilling surprises, he seized at once on the sinister figure of Professor Moriarty, glimpsed only for a moment in a single tale, and he set this portentous villain up against his hero,—thereby displaying his mastery of a major principle of playmaking. Many a novel has seemed vulgarized on the stage, because the adapter had to wrench its structure in seeking a struggle strong enough to sustain the framework of a play. Many a story has been cheapened pitifully by the theatrical adapter, simply because he was incapable of seeing in it more than a series of striking scenes which could be hewn into dialogue for rough and ready representation on the stage, and because he had seized only his raw material, the bare skeleton of intrigue, without possessing the skill or the taste needed to convey across the footlights the subtle psychology which vitalized the original tale, or the evanescent atmosphere which wreathed it in charm. Mr. Bliss Perry phrased it most felicitously when he asserted that “a novel is typically as far removed from a play as a bird is from a fish,” and that “the attempt to transform one into the other is apt to result in a sort of flying-fish, a betwixt-and-between thing.”

We all know that the ultimate value of certain accepted works of fiction is to be found, not in the story itself or even in the characters, but rather in the interpretative comment with which the novelist has encompassed people and happenings commonplace enough; and we all can see that, when one of these stories is set on the stage, the comment must be stripped off, the incidents and the characters standing naked in their triteness. But this betrayal is not to be charged against dramatic form, for all that the dramatization did was to uncover brutally an inherent weakness which the novelist had hoped to hide.

The novelist has privileges denied to the playwright; and, chief among them, of course, is the right to explain his characters, to analyze their motives, to set forth every fleeting phase of emotion to which they are subject. Sidney Lanier asserted that the novel was a finer form than the drama because there were subtleties of feeling which Shakespeare could not make plain and George Eliot could. Unfortunately for Lanier, his admiration for George Eliot is felt now to be excessive; and few of us are ready to accept Gwendolen Harleth as a more delicate attempt at portraiture

than any one of half a score of Shakespeare's heroines, so convincingly feminine. But there is truth, no doubt, in the contention that the novel is freer, more fluid, more flexible than the play; and that there are themes and subjects unsuited to the stage and wholly within the control of the story-teller. To say this is but to repeat again that the drama is not prose-fiction and prose-fiction is not the drama,—just as painting is not sculpture and sculpture not painting.

But to emphasize this distinction is not to confess that the drama cannot do at all certain things which the novel does with unconscious ease. Is there no rich variety of self-analysis in "Macbeth," one may ask, and in "Hamlet"? Did any novelist of the seventeenth century lay bare the palpitations of the female heart more delicately than Racine? Did any novelist of the eighteenth century reveal a subtler insight into the hidden recesses of feminine psychology than Marivaux? It may be true enough that, in the nineteenth century, prose-fiction has been more fortunate than the drama, and that the novelists have achieved triumphs of insight and of subtlety denied to the dramatists. But who shall say that this immediate inferiority of the play to the novel is inherent in the form itself? Who will deny that it may be merely the defect of the playwrights of our time? Who will assert that a more accomplished dramatist may not come forward in the twentieth century to prove that the drama is a fit instrument for emotional dissection?

No one has more clearly indicated the limitations of the dramatic medium than Mr. A. B. Walkley, who once declared that the future career of the drama "is likely to be hampered by its inability to tell cultivated and curious people of to-day a tithe of the things they want to know. What the drama can tell, it can tell more emphatically than any other art. The novel, for instance, is but a report; the drama makes you an eye-witness of the thing in the doing. But then there is a whole world of things which cannot be done, of thoughts and moods and subconscious states which cannot be expressed on the stage and which can be expressed in the novel. In earlier ages, which could do with a narrow range of vivid sensations, the drama sufficed; it will not suffice for an age which wants an illimitable range of sensations, and, being quick in the uptake, can dispense with vividness." And then the brilliant critic of the London "Times" dwelt on

the meagreness of Ibsen's "Master-Builder" when contrasted with "the extraordinarily complicated texture of subtle thoughts and minute sensations" in Mr. James's "Wings of the Dove."

It may as well be confessed frankly that, even in the twenty-first century, the playhouse is unlikely to be hospitable to an "extraordinarily complicated texture of subtle thoughts and minute sensations"; but we may ask also if the playhouse will really be very much poorer by this inhospitality. Even though a subdivision of the public shall find a keen pleasure in them, there are other things in life than subtle thoughts and minute sensations; there are larger aspects of existence than those we find registered either in the "Wings of the Dove" or the "Master-Builder." The texture of Mr. James's book may be more complicated than that of Ibsen's play; but this is not entirely because one is a novel and the other a drama. Both works fail in breadth of appeal; they are narrow in their outlook on life, however skillful in craftsmanship they may be, each in its own way; they are devised for the dilettant, for the men of cultivation, and for them only; and that way danger lies. Taine dwelt on the disintegration impending when artists tended to appeal to the expert rather than to the public as a whole. "The sculptor," so he declared, "no longer addresses himself to a religious, civic community, but to a group of isolated lovers of the art." In the future as in the past, the appeal of the playwright must be to the main body of his contemporaries, even though this be at the risk of not fully satisfying one group or another.

The art of the dramatist is not yet at its richest; but it bristles with difficulties such as a strong man joys in overcoming. In this sharper difficulty is its most obvious advantage over the art of the novelist; and here is its chief attraction for the story-teller, weary of a method almost too easy to be worth while. Here is a reason why one may venture a doubt whether the novel, which has been dominant, not to say domineering, in the second half of the nineteenth century, may not have to face a more acute rivalry of the drama in the first half of the twentieth century. The vogue of the novel is not likely to wane speedily; but its supremacy may be challenged by the drama more swiftly than now seems likely.

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